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SOME STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY
ISLAMIC MIDDLE EASTERN CITY

by
J.W. Cowley

This paper examines selected aspects of the urban structures and processes that have evolved since the turn of the twentieth Century in some of the larger Muslim cities of the Middle East. An account of some of these urban centres prior to the twentieth Century has been given in a previous issue of this journal (Cowley, 1979). The definitions of 'towns', 'cities' and the 'Middle East region' provided in the earlier paper, are retained in the present discussion of contemporary urban developments.

CHANGES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The changes that have culminated in the contemporary Muslim city in the Middle East, began during the early part of the 19th Century. These changes were initiated largely by external forces from Europe; Great Britain and France were the prime movers in this respect, a result of their almost complete political dominance of the region. The political domination had been achieved initially through trade but in the latter part of the 19th Century, was replaced by direct military intervention and, in some cases, occupation.

The European Colonial period of the 19th and early 20th Century, although influencing the political structure of the region, did not have quite the same impact upon urban structure. The colonial influence was far more in evidence in those cities to the west and east of the Middle East, North Africa and the Indian sub-continent respectively (Blake, 1968; Brush, 1974). In these two neighbouring regions, the colonial influence, was readily apparent in the dualism between 'madinat' and the suburban appendages in North Africa and the garrison towns or 'cantonments' of Delhi, Poona and Ahmedabad. The partial absence of a colonial influence in the Middle East was in part a result of the shorter period and intensity of colonisation as well as the influence of some traditional aspects of urbanism. Nonetheless, colonial influences upon architecture and buildings were clearly in evidence particularly in centres like Alexandria and Cairo.

Other urban contrasts in the larger urban centres in the region increasingly reflected the influences of industrialisation and modernisation. Industrial and transport developments with accompanying changes in technology affected the outward appearance of urban places. However, before examining some of the more contemporary physical and socio-economic structures and processes, it

is necessary to briefly account for the rapid urban growth which occurred during the 20th Century.

TWENTIETH CENTURY URBAN GROWTH

During the earlier part of 20th Century, there had been a significant increase in the number of urban dwellers. By the late 1930's, this increase had grown more rapidly and accelerated even further after the Second World War (Fig.1).

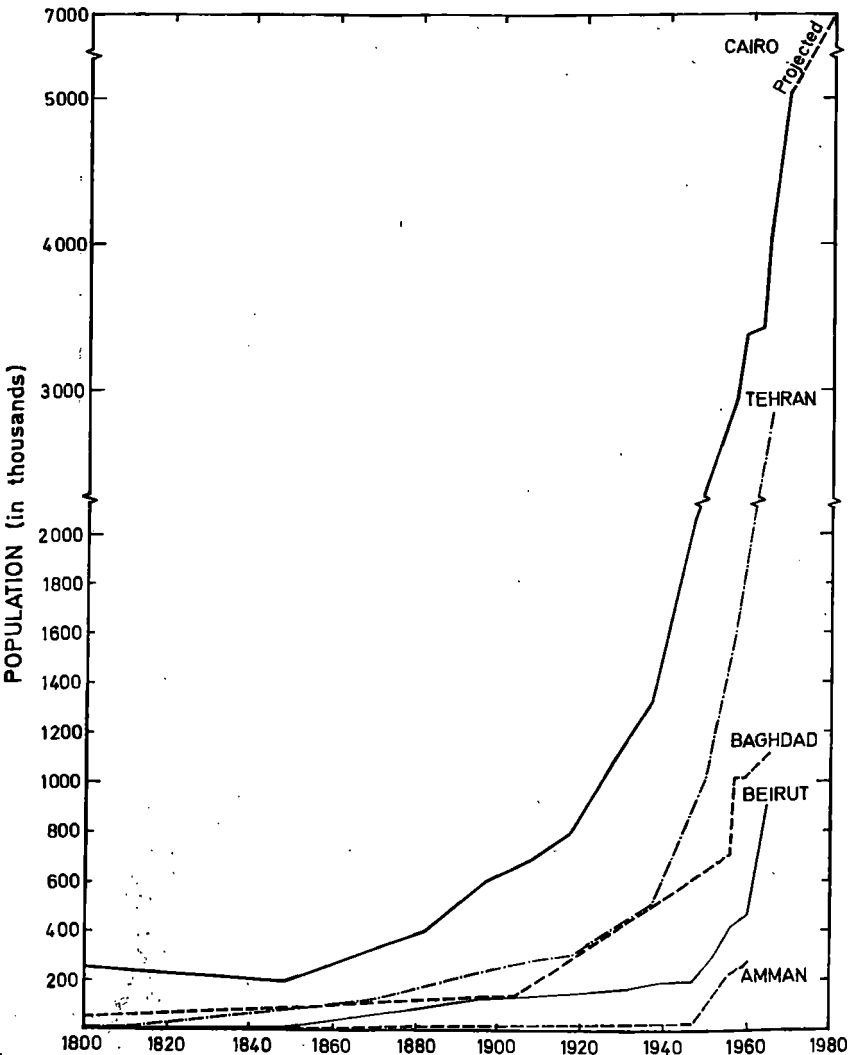


Figure 1 Population growth in some urban centres in the Middle East. Source : Adapted from Brown (1973)

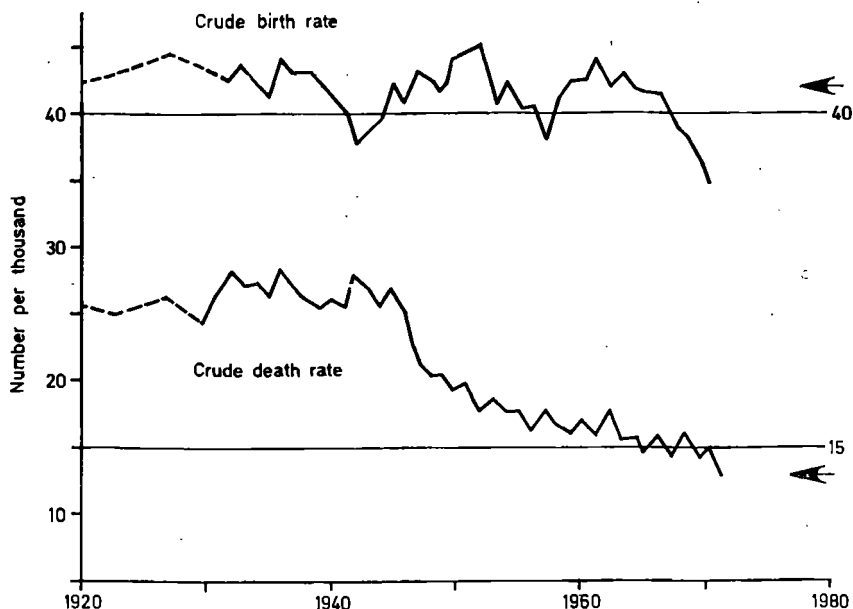


Figure 2 Crude birth and death rates for Egypt 1920-1972

Source: United Nations 'Demographic Year Book,' New York
(various years)

The main reason for the increase was to be found in the continuing rise in natural increase rates, as illustrated by Egyptian population growth (Fig.2). This 'population explosion' was attributable partly to a decline in death rates whilst birth rates remained at a high level. Apart from natural increase, the growth of urban population was a result of several other factors including the following:-

- (a) Large scale rural - urban migration had contributed to the numbers of urban dwellers; this had been precipitated by a combination of population pressures and excess labour in rural areas arising out of modernisation and an increase in mechanisation.
- (b) The numbers in some of the larger urban centres were swelled as a result of political conflict in the region. Thus Amman, Beirut and Damascus had to incorporate large numbers of refugees from the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- (c) As a result of political centralisation, the larger metropolitan centres gained in population not only from rural migrants but also

from urban migrants lower down the urban hierarchy (Darwent, 1965; Abu-Lughod, 1969). The job opportunities and changing employment structures were a magnet to those who were suitably qualified.

- (d) The 'crossroads' position of the Middle East (Cressey, 1960), with the traditional trade routes between Europe and Asia, were further emphasised with the development of international air travel. The increased contact generated by air communication not only aided the process of acculturation between 'west' and indigenous cultures but also helped in a more tangible form with respect to foreign aid and investment. This aspect was apparent in industrial and commercial undertakings which were increasingly seen on the urban landscape (Costello, 1977).
- (e) The discovery and exploitation of oil in the region undoubtedly contributed directly and indirectly to urban growth and expansion. Employment opportunities through investment of oil revenues, encouraged expansion in existing urban centres as well as being directly responsible for the development of a new generation of urban places. Such places were dedicated purely to the extraction and processing of this resource. The indirect influences of the oil revenues were apparent in the commercial, financial and recreational services in post-1945 Beirut, before its devastation by the Lebanese Civil War.

The growth in urban population continues to the present day with little sign of possible abatement. The reluctance of many Middle Eastern countries to adopt population control measures has meant that the larger urban centres will continue to act as magnets for those seeking to better their lot in life.

CHANGES IN URBAN FORM

Various influences from the past and in conjunction with developments in the 20th Century, have produced two often contrasting urban forms within the Muslim Middle Eastern city. These reflect not only different townscapes but also quite different life styles (Table 1) .

In the older 'core' areas of the traditional city the remains of the medieval walls and the internal separating walls between quarters emit an overriding desire for security. In contrast, the 20th Century appendages of a largely residential and industrial character belong more to the world of the motor vehicle and high rise building where the geometric, the planned, the practical and the accessible dominate (Brown, 1973). In many cases this physical confrontation between 'old' and 'new' is clearly in evidence. This confrontation

TABLE 1

A Summary of Differences Between 'Old' and 'New' Parts of Mashad

	<u>O l d</u>	<u>N e w</u>
Population (% of total)	74.3	25.7
Density (per acre)	150-290	50-170
Dominant type of tenancy	tenant	owner-occupier
Work status of head of household	low	high
Literacy status of head of household	low	high
Size of households	small (21%) 1-2 persons. 12% more than 6 persons.	large 10.8% 1-2 persons 36.9% more than 6 persons.
Occupation Structure	small shop owners, merchants, labourers, low worker status.	professionals, landowners, merchants, government employees, high worker status.
Annual family net income	generally low	generally higher
Annual family per capita expenditure	53.7% 2000-6000 20.4% more than 14,300	23.1% 2000-6000 65% more than 14,300
Per capita expenditure pattern	Many types of goods and services excluded, and low quality of others common.	All goods and services including many not available to lower income groups of the 'old' town. Higher quality goods available.

Source: Darwent (1964) p 268

has been brought into even closer juxtaposition with various attempts to re-design and re-plan cities in order to accommodate the new technologies. The attempts by Reza Shah in Iranian cities typified such approaches (Fig.3). Boulevards and avenues were bulldozed across the traditional urban landscape, paying little regard to existing physical, social and economic structures (Darwent, 1965; English, 1966; O'Connell, 1969).

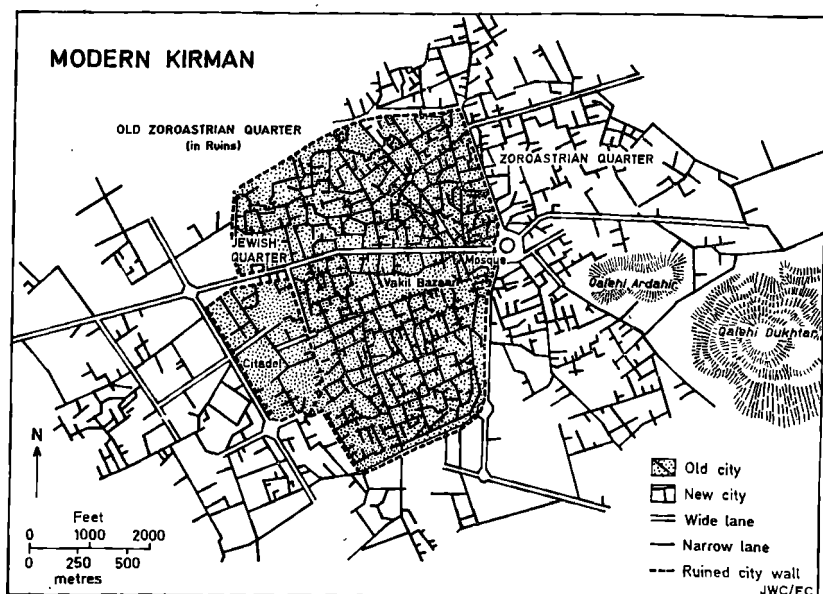


Figure 3 The Effects of modern planning upon an Iranian City-Kirman
After English (1966)

Urban developments in the period after the Second World War have seen an ever increasing expansion in the construction of large scale developments in administrative, residential and industrial areas.

Where older buildings in the traditional 'core' areas have not been replaced by modern offices and high rise apartments, disrepair and over crowding have led to rapid deterioration and these areas becoming 'slums' and 'shanties'. In contrast, open plan garden suburbs with high rise apartments have appeared beyond the older traditional city limits, clearly illustrating western influence and increasing urban development and expansion.

Urban expansion has also manifested itself in the many unplanned residential areas, those of the 'shanty towns'. Although these phenomena are not entirely

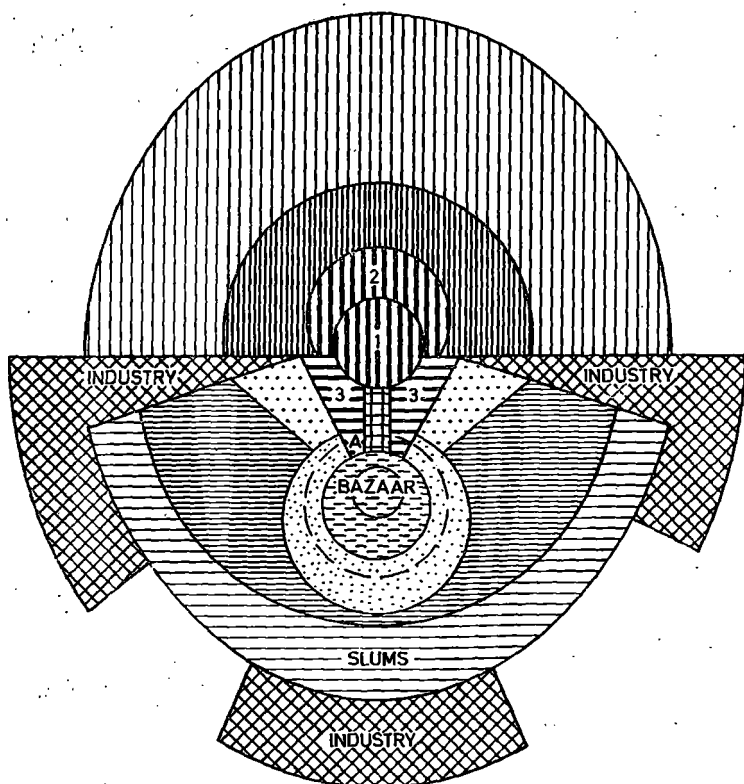
a 20th Century development, the modern 'shanties' have become an all too common townscape feature. The large influx of migrants is only partly to blame. Inadequate mechanisms for effective town planning legislation also bear a considerable responsibility (Shilber, 1973). In this respect inadequacies in planning have produced an urban land-use admixture where small workshops, residential walks and commercial activities are in close juxtaposition.

The expansion of urban development has inevitably lead to the occurrence of commercial, business and shopping areas detached from the traditional centrally located areas. These have developed so as to meet the demands and needs of the more peripheral residential and industrial suburbs. The effect of these newer outlying commercial areas has been to reduce the importance of the traditional bazaar. However for lower income groups living in the traditional core areas, the bazaar continues to provide a very essential function both in terms of capital accumulation and provision of essential needs.

More modern commercial and industrial activities have increasingly sought locations along the main boulevards and avenues. The need for accessibility and a greater awareness of site rents and land values have strengthened this process of relocation particularly amongst retailers, wholesalers and some traders. The relocation has been more easily achieved with the demise of the authority and influence of traditional elements such as the guilds and 'muhtasibs'. In general terms, traditional influences and constraints have been removed and commerce and business tend to respond to prevailing economic forces and developments within the overall political system.

Changing scales of industrial processing and manufacture have also influenced the townscape. More modern industrial developments with larger industrial units and higher degrees of mechanisation have meant that industrial location has more and more occurred on the periphery of larger cities in distinct industrial suburbs. However, again lack of adequate planning legislation has allowed industrial suburbs to be quickly surrounded by residential and commercial activities, creating an urban land-use admixture. Lack of effective planning legislation has also lead to problems of industrial pollution.

From such developments in urban morphology in the 20th Century, it is possible to produce a general model for larger urban centres in the Middle East. Seger (1975) has proposed a binodal model based upon Tehran and other Iranian cities (Fig.4). While little is known of Arabian cities, many of the elements indicated by Seger would appear to be recognisable in Arabian cities.



- | | |
|--|--|
| — Former town wall | A Ark, former palace-quarter |
| Area of traditional building | Residential suburbs |
| Old upper class quarters | Ring of modern apartment houses |
| Bazaar and its fringe | CBD - core |
| Area of traditional shopping streets | CBD - fringe, most modern economic functions |
| Densely populated, boarding houses/flats | CBD - fringe, former upper-class suburbs and first modern administrative functions |

SG

Figure 4 The Oriental City under Western influence:
Model of a Binodal City based on Tehran

Outwardly therefore, the urban landscape and morphology of cities in the region seem to indicate a polarisation between traditional and more recent western-influenced structures and forms. Despite this, some evidence is available to suggest that some traditional structures have been incorporated quite successfully into modern technology. In Mashad and several other Iranian cities, the caravanserais have made the transition quite readily and become motor workshops. (Darwent, 1965). Indications of this type would seem to indicate that many cities in the region are attempting to make the transition from traditional to more westernised forms and structures.

CHANGES IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

Modernisation and industrialisation has inevitably influenced social and economic structures and patterns in Middle Eastern cities. The introduction and development of new economic systems and industrial processes with western values and beliefs, has resulted in significant changes in social status and economic patterns. Many of the changes have produced again elements of the dualism readily apparent in the physical characteristics of cities.

The contrast between the traditional bazaar and the more modern financial and banking institutions is perhaps the best example of economic dualism. The bazaar continues to provide an important source of income and capital accumulation for lower income families and small-scale merchants. (Costello, 1973). In contrast, the modern financial and banking houses to be found in the more modern central areas, provide the financial services for the larger scale western oriented commercial and industrial enterprises. The development and establishment of modern commercial and industrial activities has not eliminated the bazaar as an economic institution. The traditional bazaar economy continues to survive and flourish, providing a very necessary contribution towards the total economy of the Middle Eastern city (Wirth, 1969).

Developments in modernisation and westernisation have not necessarily led to a corresponding development in the manufacturing sector. Analysis of the occupational structure of many cities indicates a lack of industrial development. (Nader, 1973). This deficiency is in part a result of deficiencies in raw materials other than oil, to be found in the greater part of the region. The imbalance in economic development can be attributed to other factors as well. Prestige and social status attached to 'white collar' employment along with the rapidly expanding bureaucratic structures of government, have also played a part. The lack of technical education in conjunction with some of the constraints of traditional Islamic belief (Gulick, 1965), has hindered the development of a large well trained corp of industrial workers.

The lack of industrialisation and a well developed manufacturing sector is a common economic development problem facing many of the larger cities. Increased government activity with regard to the location of hospitals, schools and tertiary educational institutions in large centres have increased the service orientation of such places without a corresponding development in industrial development. In this way, these places continue to be service rather than industrial centres (Ragheb, 1966). Changes and developments in economic patterns have inevitably affected social structures. Industrialisation albeit limited, and accompanying aspects of modernisation has resulted in the emergence of a middle income social group of professionals, army officers, administrative managers and educated clerks. This group has intervened often between the traditional elite groups and the lower orders of city society. In some places on a national scale, this middle income group has wrested political power from traditional seats of authority and introduced new ideological perspectives. In Syria, Iraq and Egypt, these elements have to a large extent been responsible for the modernisation process. However sociological studies indicate that these urban groups still retain many traditional beliefs and values (Van Nieuwanhuijze, 1965). Research in the Hamra of Beirut (Kongstad, 1973) and the suburbs of Istanbul (Dubetsky, 1977) have substantiated the earlier viewpoint.

The emergence of a middle-income group closely related to the increased dominance of secular authority, has led in most places to a significant decline in the traditional figures of authority and social organisation. Such decline in status began in the latter part of the 19th Century with the pressures of modernisation and westernisation. More recently particularly in Iran, the re-emergence of traditional religious figures has emanated from a dissatisfaction with aspects of western values and influence, and a resurgence of Islamic beliefs and values.

The spatial patterning of social groups indicate a general movement from central to suburban areas. Factorial ecologies of Cairo (Abu-Lughod, 1971), Kuwait, (French and Hill, 1971) and others all refer to this change in patterns and processes. Higher placed socio-economic groups have long since removed themselves to the more spacious suburbs while migrants (both rural and from other urban centres lower down the urban hierarchy) occupy the older core areas of the traditional city. The suburbanisation process has tended to increase social segregation, emphasising the gap between rich and poor (Darwent, 1964).

Overall, in spite of the pressures of modernisation and westernisation, the urbanisation process has not led to a complete decline in kinship or traditional ties and communal attachments. Changing economic patterns and structures have certainly led to a movement away from ascriptive to a more achievement oriented status. This is evident in the changes in the status of women and the attitudes of youth brought about by increasing economic independence and greater educational opportunities. As in the case of morphology and economic structure, the aspect of dualism is clearly apparent. However despite such polarisation there would seem to be evidence as well that at a group level there is a coexistence between traditional and modern values and beliefs.

URBAN PROBLEMS

The widening gap between rich and poor in Middle Eastern cities is one of the many problems facing politicians, administrators and urban developers. This widening gap is reflected most vividly in the area of housing. The 'gecekondu' of Istanbul, the 'Sariyas' of Baghdad and other 'shanty-town' type appendages to most cities in the region, illustrate clearly the problems of too rapid a process of urbanisation and inadequate resources and planning. Such areas are not only urban 'eyesores' but also present a considerable threat to socio-economic and political stability in the region. In one respect however, these inadequate and squalid areas do perform a useful function. A measure of security and acculturation is provided to the newly arrived rural migrant in a part of the world where social and welfare services are generally absent.

The other major urban problem concerns the 'mixing and matching' of the old and new elements of urban places in the region. In this respect the problem extends beyond the confines of urban centres. Adapting to the demands of a modern world while still retaining traditional values and beliefs, appears to be a considerable problem facing those directly involved in decision making. In the past attempts to reconcile the two have been unsuccessful through an apparent lack of awareness of the social and economic problems involved. More recently, judging from urban developments in New Baghdad, Suez and Kuwait, some of the lessons of the past appear to have been learnt (Fathy, 1973).

CONCLUSION

The contemporary Middle Eastern city appears in many instances to be a unique phenomena, reflecting in the structure the influence of a considerable history of urbanisation and urbanism. However, the most recent processes of modernisation, industrialisation and westernisation have

interacted with the past to produce modifications and alterations. The interaction of traditional and modern forces have inevitably created conflicts and contrasts as events in Iran and other countries would seem to indicate. The dramatic changes in Iran emphasise that there are no easily found solutions to the many and diverse problems of the region as a whole and the urban centres in particular. If solutions are to be found and the conflicts minimised, these should be looked for from within the context of the prevailing cultural tradition and changing aspirations of the populace. In this way it may be possible for some harmony between past and present and avoid the present situation where 'Traditionalism and modernism coexist uneasily' (Abu-Lughod, 1973).

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